

On experimental film and video:
Making a living

FRAMEWORKS@LISTSERV.AOL.COM
From frameworks listserv

On Sat, 5 Feb 2005 13:18:02 -0600, Fred Camper <f@fredcamper.com>
wrote:

e wrote:

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We don't.

Keep in mind that Brakhage, the best known "experimental" or "avant-garde" filmmaker, could not make a living from his work, and supported himself as a college professor for more than 30 years. Before that, he sometimes barely had enough to eat for himself and his family.

The situation is very different in the art world. The best-known painters are rich. Avant-garde film and video are more like "experimental" poetry or "advanced" classical music. People find other ways to make a living in order to keep doing their work. This is an old American story: consider Charles Ives and Wallace Stevens.

Fred Camper
Chicago

GENE YOUNGBLOOD

While it is true that no experimental filmmaker ever earned a living from his/her films alone, that is not the case in video. Bill Viola, Gary Hill and Tony Oursler have become wealthy doing museum installations, which are what most people think of as "video art." Nam June Paik was the first. He's from a wealthy family, but his installations increased his wealth enormously. Those are only the four best-known American examples (there are others in Europe, like Pipilotti Rist perhaps), but they demonstrate that it's theoretically possible not only to make a living but to get rich doing avant-garde video.

Then there's an increasing number of installation (or "new media") artists who don't get rich but do manage to eke out a living from their work.

This is another of video's many important contributions to avant-garde moving image practice. While money has nothing to do with artistic merit,

and is never a valid criterion of cultural value, it is nevertheless a central concern around which fundamental life decisions must be made.

Experimental filmmakers never had a choice, video artists do (of course choosing the museum-installation path is no guarantee of success. Many are called, few are chosen). The point is that there's an option in video that doesn't exist in film.

Many installation artists have never made a single-channel tape. Others (like Paik, Viola, Hill, Oursler) began their careers making tapes, but stopped doing that as soon as they got established in the installation world. This raises the perennial issue of the effect of commercial success on one's work. Some A/G filmmakers regard the impossibility of making money as a blessing. That's an important question, but it's not necessarily relevant to the simple point I'm trying to make here.

GENE YOUNGBLOOD

The money comes from all the sources you mention, plus two others: wealthy individuals who buy small (or maybe not so small) installations for their private homes, and the universal shadow-source, corporations. That's primarily where museums get their funding, after all. The era of the De Menils is over.

One of Nam June's most spectacular installations was a two-story cylindrical tower of 300 monitors commissioned by Hitachi for their corporate headquarters. What they paid him for that would keep you and me going for a decade, as would one of Viola's larger-scale production budgets.

Yes, of course these artists set their rates. If they sell to private collectors, the price is determined by their dealer. If museums are the market, I believe the artists negotiate personally. The last time I heard, Bill Viola was charging a minimum of \$30,000 for purchase of a smallish piece. That was a long time ago. As you may know, three different museums had to form a consortium to afford his big show in New York some years ago.

I find money talk extremely boring, and in a way this post has no place on Frameworks, but you asked. I'm among those who think it's a good thing that experimental filmmakers never had the option of doing it for money. The art would not have evolved nearly as quickly as it has, and the richness and diversity of practices would have been drastically limited. In this era of neoliberal hegemony the most important thing you can do is give it away.

See, if you must, www.thomaskinkade.com.

Kincade. yes, he's the richest, I think by far. I would call him an artist before I would call him a painter, though: his money is made in reproductions. The question would be what kind of artist? it's odd because if he were doing what he's doing in an art context, he'd be some kind of conceptual artist. But of course, if he were to do what he's doing in an art context, he wouldn't sell. So I guess what I mean is, he's the poster boy (pun intended) for a new kind of fallacy of authorial intention. I have no indication that Kincade is anything other than an exploitation artist in the original sense of that term (a la the Jerry Falwell ilk) or a completely un-self aware mediocre illustrator with big career and a lotta money. Or both.

On Sun, 6 Feb 2005 09:31:00 -0500, Roger Beebe <rogerbb@english.ufl.edu> wrote:

There's also Thomas Kincade, the self-proclaimed "Painter of Light." According to 60 Minutes (I think) he's supposed to be the richest painter in the world. Lots of pastoral kitsch that you can buy on QVC for \$600 each. I'm not really sure what it means to call this guy an artist though.

kurcewicz@TISCALI.CO.UK

More Pragmatic: there is a Thomas Kincade gallery in at least one shopping mall in every area of the US that has shopping malls, I think

Well, we are obviously looking at something sociologically important - who knows what goes off in his head?

Who knows what goes off in Jack Vettriano's head - people are complex

Kincade obviously has hit the "teat and the milk" in terms of what people want in the US - kind of reminds me of Komar and Melamid's project to create the most acceptable and least acceptable painting by voting. The most acceptable was a landscape with pines and mountains and George Washington and a moose or stag - the least was a late Kandinsky thing...

I think that we have a very productive discussion of aesthetics on our hands here!

Charles Chadwick s_paine@YAHOO.COM

Kincade lives in the same town that I do (Los Gatos, CA/Monte Sereno, CA). I hear he spearheaded an effort to suppress some sort of contemporary art museum show (pardon me being vague, but I don't know which one). I read about it in the San Jose Mercury I think. Anyway, if anyone is a crap artist, he is. He's the finest expression of middle America tipping their hat to a complete charlatan... someone who'd be better off

hawking his paintings at a flea market. I can't believe that he dubbed himself the "painter of light." What the hell does that mean? Couldn't that describe anyone who's picked up a brush? What an idiot... sorry for the rant.

From: bridget_irish@HOTMAIL.COM

As an artist, I make films/videos, do performance art - for the most part without expectation for getting financial compensation - when I do, I usually feel kind of surprised, and grateful, and legitimized. For a recent project, a public video & paper installation, I received \$200 - and had to get over feeling guilty about it!

But, I actually intended to respond to your question regarding - What kind of thing would the "something completely different" look like: during the Legislative Session here, I work as a temporary full-time employee in the House of Reps, as a digital imaging tech. the work usually lasts between 5-6 months, then it's back to unemployment and odd jobs here and there, while applying to the few full-time permanent positions offering health insurance that my skills and education may be applied towards, such as staff positions (few and far between!) at the local 4-year college - no luck so far, but I keep trying. (I don't want to re-locate - besides being pretty damned attached to the area and my family, including 4-yr old niece, lives here - I have cheap rent in a huge house and a LOT of stuff!)

I have an MFA, yet am reluctant to apply for teaching positions because, although I enjoy working with others in assisting them with realizing their ideas and the such, I agree with the previous person's posting, about not doing something that may pollute/convolute one's own work.

But, then again, I'm a long-time volunteer with the local film society, through which I've had the opportunity to program/curate, teach, and most recently, create a digital media editing suite for use by the organization - its staff, volunteers, and members... what I'm getting at is, I kinda can't help wanting to get involved, share what experience/skills I have with others, or trying to help them get to where they can realize their projects to the fullest, and so get involved with those type projects (including film festivals, Ladyfests, etc) that I end-up spending as much time on as one would at a full-time job! while trying to continue to work on my own stuff in the meantime...

I've come to terms with/understand that I'm going to make art, or whatever it is I do/make, regardless of time, finance, space and/or audience - and really, the best health insurance I have is continuing to make, to do - it's when I don't, that I feel like I'm going crazy or dying.

Thank you for broaching the topic - it's one that comes up often in discussion with friends and we've yet to come up with any clear path to a successful balancing act...

Best wishes,
Bridget Irish, artist/curator/odd jobs

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organizer/curator:
21st Annual Olympia Film Festival's CINE-X Expanded Cinema Series:
Int'l Shorts Showcase-Visiting Artists-Discussion Panels
November 5-12, 2004 -- www.olyfilm.org

From: elithea@GMAIL.COM
Subject: Re: possible OT: support
Date: February 5, 2005 8:58:35 PM CST
To: FRAMEWORKS@LISTSERV.AOL.COM
Reply-To: FRAMEWORKS@LISTSERV.AOL.COM

Marilyn, thank you, this is an incredible post! I can't imagine that anyone here could ever be annoyed at hearing what even Stan Brakhage had to do in order to make work.

He certainly was "good at talking about art." He was, in addition to everything else, a master talker and storyteller; I'm sure he was a master teacher too. I wish I could have been taught by him instead of just seeing him speak the once; aesthetics from Stan Brakhage--I can only imagine.

What you've given us here about the kind of efforts that go into supporting work such as Brakhage's is invaluable. Thank you again. The more we all talk, the more I'm convinced that this is a theme I'm going to look into further.

On Sat, 5 Feb 2005 18:30:22 -0800, Marilyn Brakhage <vams@shaw.ca> wrote:

Of course, I don't know the answer to your question, in general. There would be a different answer for each person, I guess. A lot of people do teach. But not everyone can do that -- famous or not. Michael Snow is one filmmaker who seems to have been able to make a living as an artist. But that is probably because he works in several different media, including commissioned public sculptures and the like. . . . And I guess he's also received a number of grants.

But as you brought up Stan Brakhage as an example, at the risk of annoying those who are tired of hearing about him, here's what I know

of his example:

Stan did all sorts of different jobs when he was young, including commercial film work, but I think it took its toll -- I gather he found it quite 'soul destroying;' and often employers found him a little too strange, also. He often found it hard to get work. He told the story of asking someone once, who was interviewing him for a job (and turning him down), what the reason was that he was being so frequently turned down, and he was told it was "something in his eyes -- they knew he wouldn't stay." . . . In the sixties he was more and more trying to make money by going on the road with his films and giving lectures/film shows, and yes, the income was paltry -- along with a lot of sleeping in people's bathtubs and the like. As Fred wrote, he and his family were often hungry and went without things. He got a few grants, though, that occasionally helped out -- Avon and Rockefeller grants in the sixties, then later a Guggenheim Fellowship (1978), plus a few NEA grants (in the 70's and 80's.) . . . But fortunately for him he was good at talking about art, in fact he loved to talk about art -- and also had a sort of "mission" as far as spreading the news of avant-garde film was concerned. And eventually he was able to make a decent living doing that. . . . He was teaching at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 1969-81, and one more semester in '84. He flew back and forth from Colorado every other week, I think it was. Then he finally got hired by the University of Colorado, in 1981. But he worked as a half-time professor there for many years, teaching in the fall and being back on the road again in the winter and spring. (He did this not only to make money, but also to get the films "out there" and to 'give' them to people.) . . . He wasn't a full time professor until '92-'93, I think it was (when he was turning 60!) There was some resistance to making him a full-time prof, and he had to put up quite an argument for it. . . . But he always refused to teach film MAKING. He only taught film history and aesthetics. And although he was also obliged to do a certain amount of administrative/bureaucratic type work while there, he never allowed himself to become buried in that the way some people do. He did it, but sometimes in his own idiosyncratic ways. Others sometimes did more of that -- various committees and the like -- because that was what they could do. But fortunately for him, he had enough of a name and enough of a powerful presence to get away with limiting that and doing certain things in his own individual ways. After (one of his) near nervous breakdowns in the mid '80's, he had also secured a promise of always having a TA assigned to him to help with grading. . . . He also made some money (though not a great deal) from the distribution and sale of his films -- eventually making some more substantial sales to a few major museums, and occasional others. Meanwhile, he continued to pour out new films -- not a matter he felt he had any choice in. He was a very hard worker -- but also could have dramatic displays of temperament about too much being expected of him and so on. And then, after being acknowledged and helped out in some way, he would go right back to his obsessive hard working again. He always said that he dreamed of just being allowed to be an artist, to do the work that was "given to him to do," and to be able to make enough money from the society, somehow, simply for being and doing that, that he wouldn't need to work at anything else. However, I suspect that he always would

have done a lot of lecturing anyway -- as that was also "given to him to do" in some sense. And writing (though that made him next to nothing.)

Marilyn

On Saturday, February 5, 2005, at 11:34 AM, e wrote:

Fred: Thanks for the quick response! Of course we do! We're alive, after all :-). It's those "other ways" that I'm interested in.

And yes, most do teach. (Was Brakhage a professor throughout? I had been under the impression that it was only occasionally, sorry. I saw him speak once when I was in art school in the early 80's, but that was merely a visit because somebody knew him, the honorarium for which must have been paltry.) At any rate, teaching is not necessarily open to all, but only to those who already have made some sort of name for themselves in order to be asked to teach in the first place. And, of course, many of those teachers do so at the expense of their work. So of adult artists who do not have those opportunities for whatever reason--how does that vast majority keep going?

I'm interested, I suppose in the "economics" of artmaking as it affects the artist him/her self. (Very, very few in the art world are rich, BTW, it's not all THAT green on the other side :-))

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Chicago

Sometimes it is perhaps good to find something that relates to your work but also does not. I work at a transfer house full time, the pay is low, but there is no public to deal with and I have access to a wealth of undiscovered found footage (don't ask don't tell). I've learned that you've got to like your job... if you hate teaching... don't do it. If you hate plumbing, don't do it. If you like working at McDonald's and making movies about their weird milkshakes, then why not? Of course, you can't live off that here. Oh well (who'd want to anyway? =)

-charles

--- DorotheainMiddle@AOL.COM wrote:

I think you should probably go into the construction trades. There's no money in making experimental films, and only subsistence wages in teaching--and you have to support yourself. Jim Jennings, whom I consider a master filmmaker, is a licensed plumber here in NY. I don't know of any other filmmaker doing plumbing. Despite all the jokes, plumbing requires a lot of skill and knowledge, so don't think it'll be easy. It's so difficult that there are only 1,000 licensed plumbers in all of NY City. You can do plumbing without a license, though, and still earn about \$40-an-hour. You'll have to find--and pay-- a licensed plumber, however, to sign off your jobs, provide insurance and worker's compensation, and make sure you're following the proper codes, which change constantly and are quite complex. To get a license, you'd have to work as a plumber for 10 years, pass an infinite number of tests on the physics of water and the local codes for sprinkler heads, boilers and the like. You'd also have to pass tests for 19th-Century techniques, such as lead wiping with molten metal. So, be prepared to spend 10 years working for someone else and preparing for lots of exams with high failure rates. In other words, you'd earn a decent living doing plumbing, even without a license, but you'd be dependent on someone who is licensed, you'd be doing work that's a great

deal more mentally and physically taxing than you might think, and worst of all, you wouldn't have much time for filmmaking. If you're realistic, though, you could still make a decent life for yourself as a filmmaker/plumber. How old are you? Would you be learning plumbing from Step One? Do you know people in that trade? Good luck--and please tell us what you decide to do.

That was the best lesson I learned from Brakhage -- the beauties of being an amateur (in the true sense of the word). Better to earn a living from something far enough away from your real work that it doesn't pollute it.

Non-fiction filmmakers do have many opportunities to whore themselves working for others, or with television money, but it almost always ends very badly. As the Clash once warned, "Stay Free."

Jeff "once-bitten, twice shy" Kreines

A question that is perhaps more important than any other for the artist, as well as everyone else. I have found it essential to reject incorporation into academia. Truly, academia doesn't want me, since I abandoned it at age 19 (around the time of the 1974 Duchamp retrospective at the Chicago Art Institute--no coincidence that!), so it's a moot point. I also reject supporting myself through my artwork as a long-term course of action. Well, there is the old avant-garde stance, that formal schooling is inimical to the free development of the artist who whose mission is to remain _untimely_, in the Nietzschean sense. One is of one's time, that's inescapable; nevertheless the awareness of the necessity of a complete break with the crude vibrations of social time is the artist's siren song. The real danger for the artist is being accepted by any sizable section of the public. This is how far we are away from anything approaching a reasonably evolved cultural apparatus. They just aren't acceptable, the reified roles of teacher and student, even in the relatively freed-up world of the art or film school. One can refer to an "a-credential" environment where there can be a teacher-student relationship that is truly fruitful, but this, it seems to me, has to be an essentially informal relationship, able to be amended as each party sees fit. Institutionalization places an onerous burden on this relationship by its very nature. Escape from all manifestations of the Law, the antinomian imperative, is the only viable path for the would-be free spirit. I have only managed a compromise solution myself in this increasingly harsh capitalist regime; I tune pianos. I bit ironic perhaps, but it keeps me largely free of the corporate machinery at all levels, while providing me with a tangential relationship to the pursuit of the humanities which is my inspiration.

David Westling

